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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENNA 003005

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/21/2022
TAGS: PREL SY AU
SUBJECT: SYRAIN PRESIDENT ASAD'S DEC 17 MEETING WITH
AUSTRIAN PRESIDENT FISCHER

Classified By: Econ/Pol Counselor Dean Yap. Reason: 1.4(b) and (d)

Summary

1.(C) In an hour-long meeting with his Austrian counterpart,
Syrian President Asad indicated a willingness to work with
the Annapolis process, to seek a resolution of Hamas-Fatah
infighting. In his remarks, he stressed the importance of
the U.S. role, and seemed prepared to recognize that
resolution of the Golan Heights would be put on the
back-burner. Asad was "very detailed" in discussing Lebanon,
where he thought the French could play a constructive leading
role. Asad's comments on Iran and Iraq were cautious and
limited. He defended Syria's human rights practices as
appropriate given the country's political and cultural
development. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Amb. Alfons Kloss, Diplomatic Advisor to Austrian
President Fischer, provided Econ/Pol Couns with a read-out on
Fischer's Dec. 17 call on President Asad. The meeting
followed Fischer's visit to Austrian peacekeeping troops in
the Golan Heights. In addition to Asad, Syria's
Vice-President and Foreign and Defense Ministers attended the
meeting.

Annapolis Process

¶3. (C) Asad described Annapolis as similar to an airplane
just taking off - whether it would complete the trip and in
what direction it would go were not clear, but it was the
important beginning of a process. Kloss was struck by how
much importance Asad placed on the U.S. role, and he also
reported that Asad had praised Secretary Rice's conduct of
the meeting. Asad said that he would do what he could to try
and bring about a Hamas-Fatah resolution before a March
meeting of Arab states, but he urged the west not to ignore
Hamas even if it continued to reject the peace process.

Golan Heights

¶4. (C) Asad had nothing new to say on the Heights, but Kloss
left with the impression that Asad is prepared to accept that
the issue be kept on a back burner and not be used to disrupt
the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Lebanon

¶5. (C) Kloss was impressed by the "very detailed" manner in
which Asad addressed Lebanon. Asad pointed to his own good
relations with the Sarkozy government. He thought the French
were well-placed to play a constructive role in resolving

Lebanon's political crisis.

Iraq

¶6. (C) Asad was very critical of Al Qaeda's role in Iraq. He talked at length about the burden that Iraqi refugees were placing on Syria, though he did note that about 50,000 had returned in recent weeks. His tone regarding the U.S. role was "very careful and reserved."

Iran

¶7. (C) Asad did not go into any detail on the nuclear issue, saying only that Iran's motives were primarily related to its search for international recognition.

Human Rights/Death Penalty

¶8. (C) Fischer raised Syrian human right's practices, focusing in particular on the pubic application of the death penalty. Asad argued that given Syria's level of cultural and political development, a strong and visible hand was needed to govern successfully. For these reasons, public application of the death penalty was appropriate.

Kloss' Impressions

¶9. (C) In addition to Asad's surprisingly strong emphasis on the importance of the U.S. role (a line Asad also repeated in Austrian press interviews), Kloss was struck by how eager Asad appeared to be to hear an EU view of developments and to

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hear what was going on inside the EU. Kloss left with the impression that Asad wants to play a serious role in the Annapolis process and he urged the U.S. to engage him with equal seriousness. However, as shown by the presence of advisors from his father's generation, new Syrian thinking would be held within limits.
Kilner